

Critical Social Policy

<http://csp.sagepub.com/>

struggles two : A political strategy for public services

Critical Social Policy 1983 3: 102

DOI: 10.1177/026101838300300807

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://csp.sagepub.com/content/3/8/102.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Critical Social Policy* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://csp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://csp.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 1, 1983

[What is This?](#)

struggles two

A political strategy for public services

Privatisation is a comprehensive strategy for permanently restructuring the welfare state and public services. It means fewer jobs and those in work working harder for longer hours for less pay and worse conditions, as well as paying more for lower quality services. It is also an attack on trade union organisation. Not surprisingly privatisation has a central role in the Tories' economic strategy.

Yet privatisation hardly featured in the general election campaign despite a Tory manifesto riddled with proposals to sell more public assets and increase the use of contractors in public services. A series of leaked government documents during the campaign also revealed privatisation plans with far reaching implications for workers and users – the Tories secret manifesto. Why did this happen?

This article examines the shortcomings of labour movement action against privatisation and puts forward a strategy to build a counter-offensive designed to improve public services *and* resist contractors and sales.

NO COHERENT STRATEGY

The labour movement's response to privatisation has lacked any coherent strategy. There has been too much reliance on simply trying to negotiate deals on productivity and working practices to produce 'savings' large enough to thwart contractors. Whilst this tactic has stopped privatisation from proceeding in a number of cases, it does nothing to prevent authorities returning for more and more later. Nor does it necessarily involve strengthening workplace organisation or building links with users in order to be in a better position to resist privatisation later. In some cases unions have relied on submitting tenders to try to outbid contractors. Unions won the refuse contract in Birmingham but suffered massive job losses and significantly higher work rate as a consequence. There has also been talk of setting up co-operatives as an alternative to contractors taking over services.

Not surprisingly there have been few successes. The privatisation of refuse and street cleansing in Bury was stopped after an 18-month struggle involving blacking all work connected with the preparation of tender documents, one-day strikes, setting up a joint union committee and a large scale leafletting and publicity campaign.

There has been little national action. Only the British Telecom Union Committee campaign has had a national focus although this has primarily been geared to trying to alter the British Telecom privatisation Bill as it went through Parliament. When the Bill is re-introduced, industrial action and other tactics will have to play a more central role.

STRUGGLES TWO

The recent spate of national publicity campaigns launched by several unions only started in April this year. NALGO's £1 million 'Put People First' campaign, whilst representing a step forward, was largely defensive and limited almost entirely to publicity. Only the NUT's Education Charter took a principled stand arguing *for* state education.

Yet one of the main lessons from the struggle against contractors in Wandsworth in 1981-82 was the need for supportive national action which was not forthcoming, except in a very limited way, at the time.

Many public sector workers, fearing unemployment and feeling understandably uncommitted to public services, have opted not to fight privatisation, but to take the risk of working for contractors. Many have since regretted that decision. The absence of any principled stand by the TUC and most of the unions nationally has contributed to the confusion and the emergence of a rag-bag of tactics.

LABOUR PARTY ACCEPTANCE OF DUAL PROVISION?

The Tories have built up a substantial lead in the ideological battle over the public/private provision of services. They have also successfully ensured that services are judged simply on their 'efficiency' rather than social needs, quality and effectiveness as well. Labour's election campaign focussed on Tory plans to privatise the NHS but even this wasn't pushed as hard as it could have been. The privatisation of education, social services, British Telecom, and the scandalous exploitation and wasted resources involved in the sale of Amersham International, British Aerospace and others, were hardly used as campaign issues. This position mirrored what had happened in local elections in Southend and Wandsworth in 1981 and 1982 when privatisation was seen as an election liability.

In 1964 the Labour government committed itself to giving home ownership priority over council housing. During the recent election campaign, Gerald Kaufman, Shadow Secretary of Environment, boasted that Labour had done more for owner occupiers than any other party. There has been no principled opposition to council house sales. In fact, the last Labour government allowed local authorities to sell over 40,000 council houses in its last year in office.

In 10-20 years' time will Labour be pushed into arguing that it is the party of private health, private education and wider company ownership? This is not inconceivable given the growth in home ownership and the shift in Labour's position on council housing since the 1920s. Between now and the next election the Tories will seek to expand private hospitals, private schools and other privately run services. In order not to alienate an even larger percentage of the electorate then using private services, Labour is likely to moderate its policies. This is the penalty for not taking a principled stand, not dealing with private services when in government, and weak resistance from the rest of the labour movement.

CRITICAL SOCIAL POLICY

learn the lessons

We urgently need to learn from past mistakes and inactivity. We cannot go on stumbling blindly trying to outbid contractors and getting more and more embroiled in a wage and job-cutting downward spiral. No one wants inefficiency or waste in public services, but we can never win the efficiency argument in isolation. The right wing in the Labour Party and trade union movement will argue that re-nationalisation will have to be avoided at all costs. They will also probably claim that people are not interested in privatisation – only in the quality of services. Does it *really* matter who delivers them and how they are paid for?!

the new right offensive

The Tories 1983 manifesto promised to sell off British Telecom, British Airways, Rolls Royce, substantial parts of British Steel, British Leyland and British Shipbuilders. Private capital will be introduced into the National Bus Company, gas and electricity industries. Private health care and private education and training will be greatly expanded. Council house sales will be pushed harder and building societies urged to build a larger share of new housing. Contracting out NHS and local government services will be expanded.

Recently leaked government documents show that extensive privatisation of education and National Insurance has been discussed in detail. They also reveal plans to reduce unemployment benefits, force young people to effectively pay for their own training, whilst simultaneously driving down wage levels, and plans for a sustained attack on trade union organisation and powers.

A number of right-wing organisations like the Adam Smith Institute and the Institute for Economic Affairs have been urging the government to privatise state pensions, railways and mines; to force councils and health authorities to contract out nearly all services and to hive-off large sections of social services to voluntary bodies.

Increased police and state powers, an attack on trade unions and further large cuts in public spending will be used to help implement privatisation ruthlessly.

key areas of struggle

In the immediate future the important areas of struggle are likely to centre around the planned sale of British Telecom, privatisation of British Rail services following the Serpell Report, the sale of gas and electricity showrooms, local government services including education, and the NHS.

A STRATEGY TO FIGHT PRIVATISATION

The limits of parliamentary style campaigns will never be more exposed than now, following the Tories landslide victory. Opposition to privatisation bills in parliament will however, be beneficial for publicity reasons. The House of

Lords will no doubt be used to soften hard line Tory proposals and to 'safeguard public interest' (ironic given Labour Party plans to scrap it). Skilful use of the select committee system could result in investigation of public asset sales and exposure of the effects on services. But none of this will actually stop privatisation.

Further drastic cuts in public spending and more centralised controls on local authority spending and rates will mean that reliance solely on negotiating and tendering tactics will now be hopelessly counter-productive. Further loss of membership will only increase some unions financial problems and lead to a heightened struggle for 'new' members between unions. Rule book changes by some public sector unions to permit recruitment in the private sector is likely to intensify the 'numbers' game. Coupled with the Tories attack on trade union rights there is a danger that immediate financial and defensive problems dominate at the expense of effective strategies to fight privatisation, improve public services and defend members wider interests in the longer term. Traditional trade union economism will not stop privatisation. So what is the way forward?

Firstly, we have to tackle head-on the Tories' ideology of private provision, competitive market forces, individual responsibility, self-interest and greed. We have to rebuild the belief that radical socialist alternatives *are* possible and feasible. Articulating the advantages of effective and efficient public services giving choice and variety, with changed social relations in a socialist economy, is essential to seeing clearly the limits of existing public services. It is also a means of understanding the causes of these limitations, and developing organisations and action needed to transform services and the economy.

Secondly, there are a number of important lessons from recent struggles against privatisation. First, since it is a political attack it must be met by a political response from the labour movement. Industrial action alone is inadequate. Escalating strike action will not necessarily increase the possibility of winning a campaign. Because privatisation is a political attack, it is essential to organise, build support and take direct action with the users of services. Occupation and demonstrations can be as important to a campaign as the withdrawal of labour.

There is also an urgent need for co-ordinated national action to oppose privatisation in principle and to support local or specific campaigns. The absence of a nationwide counter-response to the Tories' ideological onslaught has been widely felt. It would also help to overcome isolation and tackle multinational companies.

Strategies must also recognise the problems in the public services – there is a lot wrong with many services and there always will be as long as they operate in a capitalist economy. Cuts campaigns since 1975 have shown that defensive demands alone are insufficient. They are usually limited to restoring things which were already inadequate. In addition, many people will not take part in action to defend services, although they support them in principle, because they regularly experience alienation, excessive red tape and long delays. They don't experience public services as *their* services. A defensive response, inadequate between 1975 and 1980, is even more inadequate now

under the Tories' political and ideological attack. In addition, the demands and tactics used by the trade union movement in the 1960s when public services were expanding are now inadequate in a period of mass unemployment and privatisation. The well-tried tactics to fight for economic issues in a period of capitalist expansion are found wanting when capital is clawing back wages, lowering benefits, worsening conditions and shedding jobs.

Thirdly, the struggle *for* workers and users control of public services provides a framework for different campaigns on the quality and distribution of services, pay and conditions, their effectiveness and so on. It provides a means of connecting different campaigns, a basis for negotiation between workers and users, and a challenge to traditional trade union economism.

A seven point strategy to fight privatisation was developed by NUPE London Division in conjunction with SCAT in the early part of 1982. Any campaign against privatisation must involve all seven elements of the strategy although the degree to which each is used will depend on local circumstances. It can equally be used to fight the privatisation of local government services, the NHS, education, civil service and nationalised industries. The seven elements are:

- 1 **Developing alternative ideas and demands to improve services.** This could include job and service monitoring, drawing up workers and users proposals to improve and expand public services.
- 2 **Education and propaganda** must expose contractors failures, the profits and exploitation in selling public assets, the con of share ownership in nationalised industries sold-off as well as specific leaflets on pay, conditions and effects on services for workers and users. Educational workshops can play a key role in broadening understanding and galvanising people into action.
- 3 **Building stronger workplace organisations** should include extending Joint Shop Stewards Committees and combine committees throughout the public services. Privatisation cannot be fought alone particularly since multinational companies dominate tendering lists.
- 4 **Developing joint action and user committees** is essential to build political support. New ways of involving workers and users in the planning and running of services must be developed.
- 5 **Tactical use of industrial action and negotiating machinery** might involve the blacking of work connected with tendering, selective or complete withdrawal of labour to highlight the threat of privatisation. This could include cutting-off or reducing services to private industry, business and selected areas for certain periods while maintaining or improving services to working class areas. British Telecom workers have the power to virtually paralyse the City and industry.
- 6 **Direct action by workers and users.** Demonstrations, occupations, boycotts and other action can play an important part in building support and involve users directly in a campaign.
- 7 **A Counter offensive against contractors in public services** must involve three strands of activity – fighting the preparations of tenders and use of consultants, imposing strict conditions on contractors through

STRUGGLES TWO

standing orders, and campaigning to unionise and remove contractors from public services.

This strategy provides a framework to begin to build effective opposition to the Tories, multinational companies and finance capital. Each section of the labour movement must play its part. That includes Labour-controlled councils who have resolved to oppose privatisation but have been content to continue providing services riddled with contractors. Labour councils could, for example, carry out an immediate inventory of contracts in different services and launch a campaign to replace them with direct labour. The trade union movement must work towards using its full economic and political power to resist privatisation. The power of British Telecom workers has already been noted. Users of services including tenants organisations will be forced to tackle privatisation as housing management and repairs are increasingly hived-off. Joint action and workers and users links will have to be reality in practice rather than just rhetoric.

Education and propaganda campaigns must become hard hitting with locally prepared leaflets detailing the consequences of privatisation to supplement national propaganda. For example the reduced services, higher charges and handful of public telephones likely to be left when BT is sold off and concentrate on its profit centres i.e. business users. Health service workers could draw a local picture of what life would be like if an American-style private health care system were developed in Britain.

Privatisation poses a new challenge to the labour movement. The previous narrow focus on wages and conditions, slogans about public ownership and general demands for more services have caught up with us. The very existence of the welfare state and public services is now at stake. So too is the strength of working class organisations. Harnessing workers and users ideas, skills and power in a political struggle for control of public services and the economy is the only way forward.

Dexter Whitfield SCAT and Public Service Action